

The Cradle of the Congregation - Nimes



General House - Paris



Oblates of the Assumption

Religious Missionaries

203, rue Lecourbe
75015 PARIS - FRANCE

OBLATES OF THE ASSUMPTION

Religious Missionaries

Thy Kingdom Come!

OART



*Here I am,
send me!*



1 - Ecrits Spirituels
p. 693; 276

From left
to right:

- Afrique,
Burkina Faso
- Am. Latine,
Paraguay
- Asie,
Corée
- Europe,
Roumanie

OBLATES OF THE ASSUMPTION

**Thy Kingdom come,
Here I am, send me!**

“The reign of Christ is the greatest of all causes.

We need to expand both our intelligence and our hearts concerning the great questions relating to God.

We need to open the horizons, set the braziers alight,

work with zeal in accordance with the spirit of our Congregation... become saints.”

Father Emmanuel d’Alzon, 1876¹

“We have chosen not to translate the titles of the books mentioned in the notes since those books do not exist in English.”



ÉDITIONS DU SIGNE

INTRODUCTION

In making this historical journey, we render homage, by not only remembering but also by transmitting the precious heritage of the charism of our spirituality to our own and future generations. The passion to make Jesus Christ known and loved, the passion for Christian Unity and to be at the service of the poor impels us to continue to go “beyond the seas”.



*Sr. Georgette-Marie Fayolle
Superior General (1975–1993)
in Congo*

After 150 years, the seed fallen into the earth on 24th May 1865 has borne much fruit. Present today in 25 countries across four continents, the Oblates continue their journey with the men and women of their time. They live their service to the Kingdom of God with simplicity, joy and missionary dynamism.

***Thy Kingdom Come!
“Here I am, send me!” (Is. 6,8)***



*Sr. Claire Rabitz,
Superior General (1993–2011)
in Vietnam*



*Sr. Felicia Ghiorghies,
Superior General (2011–...)
in Tanzania*

*Sister Felicia GHIORGHIES
Superior General*



The Vigan Bridge



Baptismal Font in the Church of St. Peter in Vigan

1 - THE CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH OF EMMANUEL D'ALZON

1810-1832

“All the privileges I had in the past ...” (Phil,3,7)



Emmanuel was born on 30th August 1810 in the home of Viscount Andre-Henri Daude d'Alzon and his wife, Marie-Jeanne-Clemence de Faventine-Montredon, in the family castle of La Condamine in the Vigan, close to Nîmes. He loved this day of 30th August because it was the day when the Church celebrated the feast of St. Rose of Lima, a saint he felt close to. However, Emmanuel's² preferred anniversary was not that of his birth but that of his baptism on 2nd September – the day he became a child of God and of the Church, in the Parish Church of the Vigan: it would be this new date, his birth to the life of grace, that would become more important than his date of birth, and even more than his birth into the aristocracy of the Cevenole Region.

On the Coat of Arms of the Daude d'Alzon family, one can read the Latin *Deo Dati* a motto which speaks clearly about his ancestral choice being “Given to God” with a view to defending God's rights. The Coat of Arms represents a lion bearing a golden lily, surmounted with a crown and shown against the colour of blood. The personality that Emmanuel inherited from his parents could well be described as the embodiment of this Coat of Arms: Emmanuel was naturally ardent and impatient, impetuous and chivalrous, generous in adversity and ready for self-sacrifice in any combat. If the Lily was replaced with a Cross, it becomes clear how this natural zeal would one day be orientated with

André-Henri
Daudé
d'Alzon
(1774-1864)

Marie-Jeanne-
Clémence de
Faventine-
Montredon,
vicomtesse
d'Alzon
(1788-1860)



The d'Alzon
family Coat
of Arms

Portrait of “Child with a bird” painted by Marie-Pauline Le Brun 20th September 1824



Castel Lavagnac

a view to one cause alone which in his eyes was the only worthwhile one: the coming of the Kingdom of God! "May your Kingdom come!" This was the very breath of his soul: that the Lordship of Christ would be established on this earth as in heaven, that it might be established in hearts and souls! Yes, Emmanuel is among those "violent" who, according to the Gospel, take the kingdom of Heaven by storm.³

The family settled in the Castel of Lavagnac, near to Montpellier, in 1816. Emmanuel would pass his childhood there, a childhood where he perhaps felt too closely tied to his tutor as he would later explain: "In general I am not very much in favour of an elite education". It was, nevertheless, here that he received the sound education that would make of him the confident, cultured man he later became.

When his father was elected Deputy (M.P.) of the Herault and decided to take his family to Paris with him, Emmanuel was thirteen years old: he continued his education at St. Louis College, Boulevard Saint Michel, then at the private College: Stanislas College. Here in the exciting atmosphere of Paris, the adolescent would make friends with young catholic intellectuals who wished to be active in their society, like Frederic Ozanam, Henri Lacordaire, Charles de Montalembert. Emmanuel had developed an understanding of human relationships, he made contact easily and he thrived with great ease in this intellectual



milieu. He had inherited a degree of political understanding from his father: attentive to those in need, he wished to work so as to facilitate the Church making a rapprochement between the various classes in society. It was in this context that he made contact with a young priest who would have a decisive influence upon him: Fr. Felicite de Lamennais, whose ambition was to reconcile the Church with the modern world, and to liberate French Catholicism from its royal attachments.



In his early years Emmanuel looked to see how he could engage in the world: he considered a military career but his parents dissuaded him from this and orientated him towards the study of Law at the Sorbonne. Emmanuel tried this but without conviction and remained dissatisfied. He carried within him the desire to offer himself fully to God radically, without half-measures. In the solitude of the Castel of Lavagnac, where he escaped to for a short time, the desire to consecrate his life to the priesthood and to renounce the advantages his family status and fortune, grew in him.



Emmanuel was 22 years old when he left for the Seminary of Montpellier. It was a moment of immense detachment for this young man of a sensitive and ardent nature: *"It is true that I felt a moment of great sadness when I left Lavagnac. I left quietly; my poor mother... had asked me not to tell her the hour of my departure. I remained silent but despite my self-mastery, I was in terrible turmoil."*⁴ (16th March 1832)

Frédéric Ozanam,
Henri Lacordaire,
Charles de Montalembert



Fr. Felicite de Lamennais

2 - HIS SPIRITUAL TRAINING UP TO HIS ORDINATION

1832-1834

“The one who does not renounce all cannot be my disciple”. (Lk 14,33)

Emmanuel was a young man hungry to learn rapidly and be educated intellectually. He found Montpellier boring and decided to leave for Rome. He began by following lectures at the Gregorian but again he was dissatisfied and he finally opts to settle for private study with the help of a few solid theologians which corresponded better to his aspirations.

Then a crucial moment occurs in Emmanuel’s journey. In Montpellier he read secretly the newspaper of Lamennais: “l’Avenir”, against the wishes of the Bishop but with the encouragement of some of his professors.

At the moment when he presented himself for ordination, Emmanuel was forced to make a real choice – one that would determine the rest of his life: he understood that to prefer Jesus Christ to all, meant also to prefer his Church – the spouse of Christ – to his own tastes, ideas and personal options. In 1834 the encyclical of Gregory XVI *Singularis vos* had condemned the last work of Lamennais: “Words of a Believer”. The time had

come for Emmanuel to make an authentic act of submission and humility which, for the remainder of his life would bear fruit. His priesthood would, thereafter, be lived in fidelity to the Church of Rome and to the Pope.

This is what he wrote to his father from Rome, on the eve of his ordination to the priesthood on 26th December 1834:

“An accusation was made against me in relation to my opinions. I was told nothing about it but two days before my ordination to the Diaconate, Cardinal Odescalchi, who had been good enough to promise to ordain me and who subsequently had been named Cardinal Vicar, asked me to call to see him. He asked what I thought about Lamennais. I replied that I had submitted to the encyclical and that I had disapproved of “Words of a Believer” even before its condemnation (...)

He proposed in the name of the Pope that I sign a formula to say I adhered to the encyclical and that I did not adhere in any way to the opinion of those who refused to condemn a certain system of philosophy. He proposed that I take some time to reflect on this. I replied that I did not need any time to reflect and I would sign immediately (...)

I would like to have sent you a copy. I asked the Cardinal this morning for one and he promised to do so but that the original was in the hands of the Pope who, he assured me, was very happy with the promptness of my submission. It is a bit annoying to be drawn to the Pope’s attention in this way. I will be presented to him one of these days and I will see how he receives me.”⁵

Before leaving Rome in May 1835, Fr. d’Alzon was actually received by Pope Gregory XVI with great affection at a private audience.





3- FR. D'ALZON AT THE SERVICE OF THE DIOCESE NÎMES 1835-1844

“You have been faithful in small things...” (Mt. 25,2)

His years of training in Rome had profoundly rooted the young Fr. d'Alzon at the heart of the universal Church, and when he returned by choice to his diocese of origin, he had this broad and open spirit which made it possible for him to keep a close eye on what lay beyond the frontiers of his diocese and his country: “We must always work for Rome, sometimes without Rome but never against Rome ...”⁶ (23th August 1834)

The young priest was 25 years old and full of youthful zeal! He arrived in Nîmes in November 1835 where his bishop, Mgr. de Chaffoy, welcomed him and accompanied him in the beginnings of his ministry. Fr. D'Alzon preached, confessed, and administered the sacraments. But he was already thinking about several evangelical projects: the conversion of protestants who were very numerous in the region, the education of young people, the creation of “youth clubs”, charitable associations. To support his ministry of preaching and spiritual direction, he established a group of Adorers of the Blessed Sacrament.

Illustration of Fr. d'Alzon – Creation of Fr. Bisson



6 - Ecrits Spirituels, p. 759

7 - Lettres du P. d'Alzon, T. XIV, p. 82

8 - Ibid. 7

9 - Dossier sur la Vie et les Vertus, vol. II, T. I, p. 261

“I sometimes feel like asking that I be left to be a missionary where I would be at ease, because to be frank, my taste is for action”⁷ (he wrote in May 1836)

The Bishop moderated and directed the priest who seemed at times to be committed to thousands of activities. However, he agreed that he could direct a project which he held dear: to establish a house which would be “A refuge for repentant girls”. And he encouraged him paternally with the following prophetic words: “Off you go, my child, all founders are fools, and you seem to be made of the same character”.

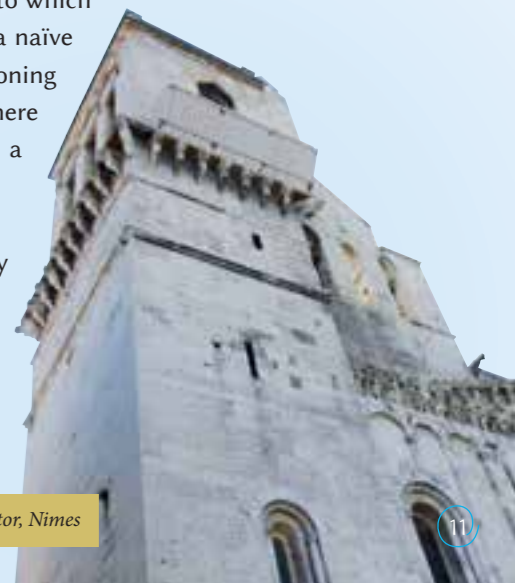
If he had, indeed, the character of a founder, Fr. d'Alzon for the moment was an “honorary canon” and Honorary Vicar General of Nîmes – nominations which he accepted from his bishop in obedience but not without a certain humour:

“It appears they have discovered I have a vocation as an Administrator – which means every eight days I must give my opinion of cases of conscience presented to the Diocesan Council to which I now have the honour of belonging. Don't laugh too loudly at the thought of a naïve 25 year old in the midst of five or six old men, listening and responding, questioning and objecting and behaving, in short, as if I knew as much as the others. Somewhere I find it rather funny to be the Great Vicar but what can I do?”⁸ (written to a friend in May 1836)



In March 1839, the new Bishop, Mgr. Cart, would name him officially “Vicar General” of Nîmes with great astuteness: “He is a man of God, and a capable one: that is why I find it apt: he will urge me onwards and I will help to restrain him.”⁹ The only reservation made by Fr. d'Alzon to this nomination was that he be allowed to live in a flat in the town rather than the episcopal palace.

Monseigneur Cart



The Cathedral of Our Lady and St. Castor, Nîmes

Normally Fr. d'Alzon would have been named Bishop a few years later, and well intentioned friends proposed his name for various bishoprics. But he had no ambition of this sort: on the contrary at 34 years of age, in the Marian Sanctuary of La Consolata in Turin, he pronounced a vow to remain a simple priest to "better serve the Church"¹⁰ and to never accept, except under an order of the Pope, any ecclesiastical office other than that of a priest.



Sanctuary of the Consolata in 1852 - Turin, Italy

The Holy Spirit led him along another path, and gave his legitimate ambition another hue: he confided he felt urged "as if by an inspiration from heaven, not only to embrace the way of perfection but to establish a Religious Institute."¹¹

4- FROM THE COLLEGE IN NÎMES TO THE FOUNDATION OF THE AUGUSTINIANS OF THE ASSUMPTION

1845-1857

"I will confide you with greater..." (Mt. 25,21)

Fr. d'Alzon had recently met Eugenie Milleret, who had established in 1839, a female Congregation, placed under the patronage of the Assumption of the Virgin and destined for the education of young girls. During the years of the foundation, he supported the person who was the "mother" of the Religious of the Assumption and, once he had become her Spiritual Director in 1841, he committed himself, with the grace of God to lead her towards holiness.¹²

It was soon the turn of the young Foundress, Mother Eugenie, to encourage Fr. d'Alzon who also felt called to establish a new Congregation.

The choice of place to plant this fledgling Congregation had not been long matured, when a close friend of Fr. d'Alzon, Fr. Goubier, bought for him, without consultation, the Catholic Boarding School of Nîmes whose pupils were decreasing in number. It was here, in this "Assumption College" that Fr. d'Alzon created the base for his work of education, one that at its time was

College of the Assumption

original, encouraging frankness and respect for the personality and the talents of each one. Following negotiations with the Minister for Public Education, he obtained permission to teach freely in his Boarding School. He recruited qualified teachers from the public education sector who also shared his faith and his convictions. On 1st October 1844, he officially became the Headmaster of the College.

At the same time he remained attentive to this “call to Religious Life” which he had discerned in prayer and, in June 1845, in the sanctuary of Our Lady of Victories in Paris, he pronounced private vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, to which he added the vow to devote his life to the extension to the reign of Jesus Christ. In the same year, at the beginning of term, he began his religious life with five companions who had been teachers at the College. To live their vow of poverty, he asked for hospitality at the College and lived in the Infirmary. With the help of Mother Marie-Eugénie, he had a habit made in white wool based on the Dominican habit¹³ – that of Fr. Lacordaire, and he began to wear it but only in the morning and evenings. Mgr. Cart finished by allowing him to try religious life for a year and on 24th December 1845, the Novitiate began its life in the College without a ceremony of the Taking of the Habit, with five priests and a lay person.

Progressively, Fr. D'Alzon would free himself of the administration of the College, in order to devote himself to his new mission as a Founder.

“Our little Association proposes to become holy by extending the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in souls. Our spirit is based more particularly on an ardent love of our Lord Jesus Christ and of his Holy Mother, our special patron; a great zeal for the Church and an inviolable attachment to the Holy See. Our life should be one of faith, devotedness, sacrifice, prayer, frankness and apostolic spirit.”¹⁴



Church of Our Lady of Victories, Paris



The oldest representation of St. Augustin.
Fresco, St. John Lateran, Rome

He would have to wait with patience until Mgr. Cart authorised their first vows. Five years later, on Christmas Eve 1850, permission was given for public vows. On Christmas Day, Fr. d'Alzon pronounced his vows for a year in the chapel of the College, in the presence of the Teachers and pupils, before receiving the vows of his five brothers. To the three traditional vows, they added a vow to “work with all their strength for the extension of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in souls.”¹⁵

The Congregation of the Augustinians of the Assumption was born into the Church. It was placed under the patronage of St. Augustine whose Rule would inspire them: “St. Augustine, our patriarch, will be our principal guide.”¹⁶ As for what they would be named: “Assumption”, was witness to their spiritual proximity with the Congregation which Marie Eugénie had founded, and he reminded them that it was the College of the Assumption which made it possible for the community emerge. The College gave its name to the Congregation.¹⁷

Fr. d'Alzon himself laid the foundation stone. After having given a name to his Congregation, he outlined the main apostolic orientation: primarily education but also popular apostolates, via the media, pilgrimages and social action as well as foreign missions and, always, to include the essential dimension of Church unity.

On 12th December 1851, Mgr. Cart gave his definitive agreement to the Congregation of Priests of the Assumption, prior to the Congregation receiving the Decree on 1st May 1857.¹⁸

5- I BLESS YOUR WORKS OF THE EAST 1860-1865

“Make disciples of all Nations.” (Mt. 28,19)

In 1860 Fr. d’Alzon lost his mother and his eldest sister, and he found himself, therefore, inheriting half the considerable family fortune. For him who had made a vow of poverty, it was obvious that this fortune would have to be put at the service of the Church for the Coming of the “Kingdom of God”. But how? Would he purchase the Cenacle or what was thought to be the presumed tomb of the Virgin Mary in Jerusalem – this was his dream? But Pius IX, who had learnt about this inheritance of Fr. d’Alzon, suggested¹⁹ he use his fortune for work in Bulgaria, where a College for young people or Seminary could be established.

In 1862, Fr. d’Alzon accompanied his Bishop to Rome together with 67 diocesan priests, for the canonisation of the Japanese Martyrs. During the public audience of 4th June, he heard Pope Pius IX pronounce these words: “I bless your works of the East and the West.”²⁰ This blessing on his works of the East, which at this point were not a fixed project, appeared to Fr. d’Alzon as confirmation that he should work for Unity with the Orthodox Church, and even more

Pope Pius IX painted by Louis Gallait in 1861



Basilica of St. Peter, Rome.
Blessing of Pope Pius IX

than a confirmation – rather an order of the Pope which he should undertake! It was, in effect, the great desire²¹ of Pius IX that the Eastern Schism should be remedied, particularly in Bulgaria.

Fr. d’Alzon began by sending Fr. Victorin Galabert in whom he had enormous trust, and who had volunteered for this distant expedition. He disembarked in Constantinople on 20th December, 1862 and tried to analyse the situation of the Bulgarian catholics who lived within the confines of Islam: he understood that politically, they were dependent on the Sultan – because at that time Turkey still dominated the countries that bordered the Eastern Mediterranean, and that from a religious point of view they depended upon the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Pope, whose representative was Mgr. Brunoni, supported the catholic minorities in these countries in an attempt to facilitate their emancipation from the Ottoman yoke. It so happened that the apostolic delegation of Mgr. Brunoni, in order to help the numerous Christian works already on site, had amassed a debt of 200,000 francs which Fr. d’Alzon would clear – this would be something which would easily open the doors to the sons of Fr. d’Alzon”.

But the report of Fr. Galabert was not convincing, and the situation so very complex that Fr. d’Alzon, with the conquering spirit which characterised him, promised to join him in April 1863. So he took the boat, and beginning to take stock of the measure of this new adventure, he wrote, not without having a laugh at his own expense: “My God, in what kind of wasps nest am I about to throw myself? But one must be a bit foolish for Our Lord!”²² Reaching Constantinople to preach a Lenten retreat, he went on as far as Adrianople, and saw that there was, in effect, an immense amount to do “in order to actively engage in whatever way possible to make the return of the Orthodox to Catholic Unity.”²³ There were of course, Religious men and women present, but no seminary and there were no local clergy. He took

Thy Kingdom Come!

Here I am, send me!

19 - Cf. Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon T. IV, p. 339

20 - Ibid. 19

21 - Cf. Ecrits Spirituels, p. 1450

22 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon, T. IV, p. 188

23 - Dossier sur la Vie et les Vertus, vol. II, T. II, p. 718



Père Victorin Galabert



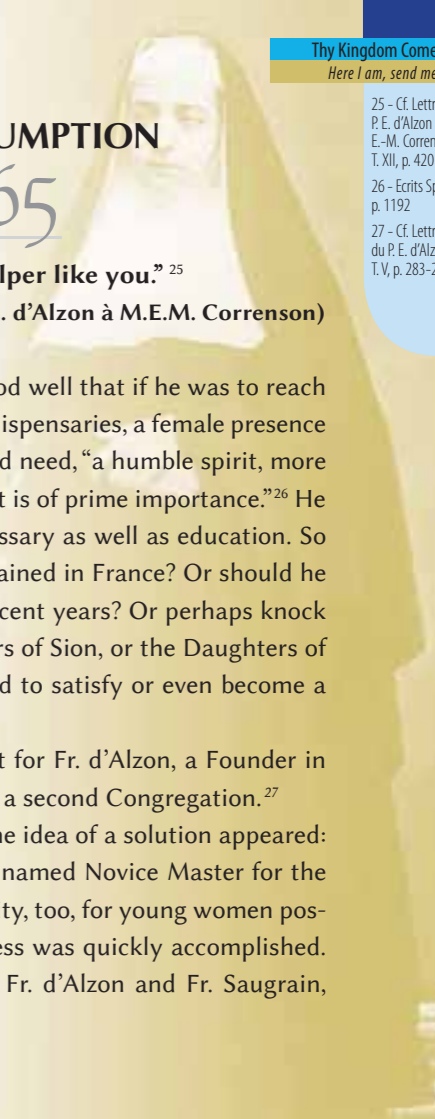
stock of the population, the schools, the churches and he returned with the firm intention to obey the Pope without further delay. On his return, he went to Rome to report on his mission: “yes” to a College, “yes” to a Seminary, but moreover, it would be necessary to have more direct contact with the local population and to be at their service.

Despite his great zeal for the mission, he realised he could not return to Bulgaria, and he left the responsibility to Fr. Galabert to take whatever suitable initiatives were possible. By the end of 1863, Fr. Galabert had penetrated to the interior of the country on the side of Adrianople and Philippopoli. On his return from this expedition, he decided modestly, to open a school in Philippopoli with 90 pupils consisting of a class of Latin Bulgarians who were generally despised by the local population. On 10th December 1863: Fr. Galabert, who was a medical doctor and a doctor in Theology, together with Fr. Barthelemy, another Assumptionist who was a Pharmacist, improvised as builders and school teachers. This was the first foundation in the East.

From the month of March 1864, Fr. Galabert²⁴ raised the question of having Sisters, without whom the apostolate of the Fathers would never be completely fruitful. To present his request he relied on the support of the Latin Bishop of Sofia to explain to Fr. d’Alzon that the Bulgarian families desired a school run by Sisters. He re-stated his desire to Fr. d’Alzon who understood at this point that his men in the Eastern Mission would need a female presence to accomplish their ultimate mission.

Fr. d’Alzon in the East in 1863

1865



6- THE FOUNDATION OF THE OBLATES OF THE ASSUMPTION

“...I thank Our Lord each day for having sent me a young woman, a helper like you.”²⁵

(P.E. d’Alzon à M.E.M. Correnson)

Fr. d’Alzon was attentive and a realist, and he understood well that if he was to reach the Bulgarian families through schools and dispensaries, a female presence would be needed on the ground. At the service of this delicate mission, one would need, “a humble spirit, more able to reach the poor whom Our Lord especially loves, and a task, therefore, that is of prime importance.”²⁶ He understood that in order to penetrate the home, charitable work would be necessary as well as education. So he sought a solution: should he recruit young Bulgarian women who could be trained in France? Or should he seek the help of the Religious of the Assumption, to whom he was devoted in recent years? Or perhaps knock at the door of other Congregations already established in the East, like the Sisters of Sion, or the Daughters of Charity? None of these projects of possible missionary collaboration seemed to satisfy or even become a reality.

“If others cannot do it, we will try ourselves!” It was as simple as that for Fr. d’Alzon, a Founder in soul! To respond to the call of the Bulgarian mission, he began to found a second Congregation.²⁷

Enterprising but always the realist, Fr. d’Alzon looked around and the idea of a solution appeared: he turned to one of his Brothers, Fr. Hippolyte Saugrain, whom he had named Novice Master for the Brothers, and asked him whether he would be prepared to take responsibility, too, for young women postulants with a view to establishing a new Congregation. It seemed the business was quickly accomplished. The Founder could not rely yet on Miss Eulalie de Regis or Marie Correnson. Fr. d’Alzon and Fr. Saugrain,



Father Hippolyte Saugrain

knowing several among their directees, the former was pleasantly surprised and very impressed to witness the good will of some young women from the Cevennes Mountains, and their generous response when they heard of the missionary project:

“They bring with a generous heart, very little education, but a very great deal of good will and immense trust. The fact is that poor girls, when it comes to dedicating their lives to God, do not create many obstacles, not so many ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’, or ‘howevers’ as the great and holy ladies.... Oh! The simplicity and openness of poor girls! Oh! Wisdom and prudence of the great and beautiful ladies! Oh! To be at one with oneself!”²⁸

With Mother Marie-Eugenie, Fr. d'Alzon had dreamed of creating, among the Religious of the Assumption, a branch of Oblates, between Religious and Lay Sisters, which would respond to the needs of the Mission. This might have been done but Fr. d'Alzon kept this name of “Oblates” for a female Congregation which he founded for the Eastern Mission. And they were to be called “Oblates of the Assumption” because their Congregation would be grafted on that of the “Augustinians of the Assumption” which he had founded in Nîmes.

With amazing dynamism, he installed the six first “Oblates” very close to Vigan, his native town on 23rd May 1865. He rented a house for them, Rochebelle, and blessed the house giving it the title “Our Lady of Bulgaria”. Each of the Oblates received their name in religion and the following day, on the feast of Mary Auxiliatrice, he celebrated the Mass of Foundation for them. The same day, Bishop Plantier, who was on a pastoral visit, blessed this house from the outside. On the following 14th August, they took the Religious Habit and began their noviciate. Six months later, there were eighteen.

The first house of the O.A. Rochebelle,
“Our lady of Bulgaria”

7- A FOUNDRRESS

FOR THE CONGREGATION OF THE OBLATES

1866-1868



“He did not hold on jealously to his equality with God ...” (Phil.2,6)

Fr. d'Alzon discerned the good will of these young girls would not be sufficient to make Religious of them, and even less, to make missionaries of them. Although Fr. Galabert, on the ground, did not hide what he expected of the future Oblates:

“It is not enough that they be school teachers, they must also be sisters of charity. It is something absolutely indispensable in the East. It is the only way to penetrate the muslim families or the schismatics”²⁹ (21st July 1865).

It was a question, therefore, of training these young women to a demanding and beautiful way of charity, and to find for them a Novice Mistress capable of entering into this spirit. Mother Eugenie agreed to provisionally delegate one of her Sisters, Sr. Marie-Madeleine, who would help them in their first steps as Oblates of the Assumption, while waiting until Fr. d'Alzon found someone who was called to be Superior of this mission!

Untiring and trusting, Fr. d'Alzon thought about one of his spiritual directees, Marie Correnson who would become Superior of the Oblates and help him with the work of their foundation.

Portrait of Marie Correnson at 23 years. Painted at
the request of her grandfather, Dr. Pleindoux

Fr. d'Alzon knew the family well, especially her father who was the College doctor. His first meeting with her dates from 21st May 1859 when Marie was seventeen years old and Fr. d'Alzon 49 years old. A profound spiritual relationship existed between them, encompassing a real affection, mutual trust but also an exacting firmness in view of the holiness to which each one aspired:

*"You must allow me, my daughter, the simplicity of a Father and that of a true Father to say to you: with what happiness I thank Our Lord to have allowed you to be my spiritual daughter. When I have become used to being your "Father" perhaps this will diminish and we can become good friends. For the moment, it is a joy, an immense joy to have as a spiritual daughter, a young woman who has certain faults but who wishes to be a great saint."*³⁰ (11th February 1864)

Fr. d'Alzon had felt for some time that Marie had a call to the consecrated life, but he wisely allowed this call to mature. However, in his letters of direction, he insists that she takes her vocation to holiness seriously, that she should not be following the latest fashions whether she was "in the world" or outside of it. After his first trip to the East, he wrote to her describing what he had discovered, he explained the schism which was causing suffering to the Church, he confided his missionary projects to her prayers:

*"So, my dear Marie, let us become saints, and from near or far, let us devote ourselves to this great and beautiful work"*³¹ (5th March 1863)

Above all, he believed he had discerned that they were both called to collaborate in the same work, even if he clearly did not yet know exactly what form their collaboration would take:



*"Does it not seem that Our Lord desires that we work together? So why not prepare yourself by living a firm and serious life which might be required of you one day?"*³² (9th April 1863)

So, Marie prayed for the first Oblates, she was introduced at the Foundation Mass which Fr. d'Alzon celebrated on 24th May 1865 at **"Our Lady of Bulgaria"** and she invested herself in this burgeoning work which her Spiritual Father requested her to pray for:

*"Beyond Bulgaria, there is the whole Slavonic world: sixty million souls to convert. Nothing less than that!"*³³ (1869)

Then one day, in July 1866, after having long matured her request in prayer, Fr. d'Alzon proposed that Marie Correnson join the first Oblates, to be their Mother and become, with him, the Foundress of this new Congregation. He did not hide from her the necessary detachments she would have to make, or the suffering that would await her, nor the crown of thorns he would place on her head, but he acknowledged also that God wished that he needed her."

*"Do you feel within you the strength to have the real heart of a mother? Are you resolved to give birth to this work in the suffering it is easy to foresee?"*³⁴ (20th July 1866)

This request that Fr. d'Alzon plunged Marie into created a great interior debate in her, where she weighed all the sacrifices that were being asked and which seemed to her insurmountable. Her refusal was clear: it was not the harsh and poor life which frightened her but to have to live with uneducated girls, she who had up to now only known the high society life of the bourgeoisie of Nîmes.

Fr. d'Alzon did not stop at that, but with fatherly tenderness knew how to persuade. He knew this young woman well enough to know



Mother Emmanuel-Marie of the Compassion

that this was not a definite refusal, that it was simply an expression of her anxiety, and he writes to her in these lines where one can discern benevolent kindness for his young directee:

*“I think this repugnance you feel will one day be the subject of deep humiliation. Don’t you think Our Lord took rather a longer downward step to join our humanity, from heaven to live among sinners – a bit bigger step than you would have to take from your position to that of my poor girls... If I had known how to preach better to you and given you a better example of the apostolic life, you would have understood the beauty which Our Lord began by taking firstly rough fishermen and others, just as we have commenced with our mountain girls.”*³⁵ (23rd August 1866)

Marie resisted no longer to the request of her spiritual father, and responded recognising humbly her lack of generosity as is witnessed in her letter of reply:

*“Forgive me Father for the pain I must have caused you. After having read your letter, I offered myself to Our Lord as I have perhaps never done before, asking Him to take me as He wished. I will, therefore, do what you ask in your kind letter. I need today to renew my vow of obedience. Help me love Our Lord – I feel I do not love Him but I desire very much to do so.”*³⁶ (24th August 1866)

Fr. d’Alzon welcomed with joy his spiritual daughter’s ‘Yes’. Despite his impulsive and sometimes impatient temperament, he knew, too, how to be prudent when necessary, and so that Marie had time to allow her response of love to mature, he arranged for her to have a ‘secret Noviciate’ which allowed her to remain in the world for a few more months. On 7th April 1867, in the presence of the first Oblates gathered in the Chapel in Nîmes, she received from her Spiritual Father her name in Religion: **“Emmanuel-Marie of the Compassion”**, as well as her religious habit which she would wear at the right moment. She rejoiced in the motto he gave her: **“to be all to all”**³⁷:

*“This motto suits my character very well “to be all to all”, to win for Our Lord many souls. I understand this need to give oneself, to devote oneself for the extension of the reign of Our Lord”*³⁸. (16th May 1867).

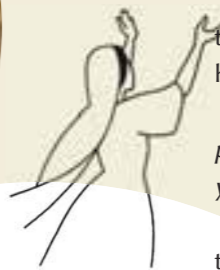
A few weeks later, as she had not received her parents’ consent, Marie decided to respond despite this to the call of Christ which she felt more and more pressing. One morning, she left the house as usual to go to Mass but that day, that famous 27th June, she would not return! Dressed in her Religious Habit she took

35 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles 1993, p. 61-62

36 - Lettres de M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles-Paris 2005, p. 17-18

37 - 1Co 9,22

38 - Lettres de M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles-Paris 2005, p. 28



The road for Rochebelle where the Oblates welcomed with open hearts the one whom Fr. d'Alzon had given them as Mother:

*"All the Sisters were in the chapel and as soon as she took her place as the Superior, they intoned the Magnificat. And I can assure you it was sung from the bottom of their hearts."*³⁹ (27th June 1867)

Fr. d'Alzon, too, sang a *Magnificat* interiorly, and conscious of the need to form this young Superior of 25 years, he proposed

that she continue the intensive Noviciate she had begun in the world:

*"Your noviciate: I will do it by writing to you as usual, in allowing you to assist so to speak in the development of all my thoughts about this work. The noviciate for you will consist in our conversations and our correspondence. In any event, if you are to be the true mother of this work, you need a noviciate experience lived a little differently because you will soon need to communicate this to others."*⁴⁰ (14th May 1867)

Then he appealed to Mother Marie-Eugénie to initiate his novice to the customs of Religious Life in the space of the summer weeks.

In April 1868, at the end of this intensive training, the novice pronounced her perpetual vows into the hands of Fr. d'Alzon who himself wrote the official proceedings of this solemn commitment:

*"On 18th April 1868, Mother Emmanuel-Marie of the Compassion, following a year of noviciate, made perpetual vows into the hands of Fr. d'Alzon, in the presence of the Augustinians of the Assumption and of the community of Sisters in Nîmes. This profession was, appropriately, the first, as the Foundress of the Oblates."*⁴¹

Inside the ring of profession which he offered this young spouse of Christ, he had the delicacy to engrave the initials of a "word" received in the past by St. Rose of Lima, a saint who was dear to him: R.C.M.T.M.S.E.:

*Rosa Cordis Mei Tu Mihi Sponsa Esto,
Rose of my heart, be my spouse...*



8- DEPARTURE FOR THE EASTERN MISSION

1868

"Here I am, send me" (Is.6,8)



On 19th April 1868, following Mother Emmanuel-Marie Correnson, five other Oblates pronounced the final vows into the hands of Fr. d'Alzon. Later on they would receive the motto inspired by the prophet Isaiah: "Here I am, send me!"⁴²

Fr. d'Alzon loved to communicate to his daughters his own ardent missionary zeal: *"I wish that my new Congregation, like the first, that of the Fathers of the Assumption, have inner zeal..."*

*Nothing extraordinary externally, but great delicacy of heart, enthusiasm, prudence and the tact and courage to confess Jesus Christ in a way that is apostolically useful."*⁴³

During the Summer of 1867, Fr. Galabert, passing through France, went to Rochebelle where he took note of the progress of the young Oblates: it was the necessary spur he needed on his return to encourage him to make the necessary arrangements to welcome them. He chose Adrianople, as the first foundation for them, and asked the notabilities of the town to finance the acquisition of a property where the sisters might live and create a school for their children. He proposed the celebration of Easter 1868 as the date for their installation.

The time to leave for the East arrived. On 25th April 1868, the five first Oblate Missionaries, between the ages of 23 and 33 years of age embarked at the port of Marseille, accompanied by Mother Emmanuel-Marie of the Compassion, Fr. d'Alzon and Mother Eugenie.

*"I have kept a moving souvenir of this first departure for the Mission. It was hard to say whether it was Mother Emmanuel Marie or Fr. d'Alzon who was happiest. They were full of joy and hope."*⁴⁴ (Louise Correnson)

Following a difficult and tiring journey, the Sisters disembarked on 7th May at Caragatch, a suburb of Adrianople. The whole of the European colony, together with the French Consul, were there (the men on horseback, the ladies in carriages) and they were triumphantly welcomed as they arrived in a buffalo drawn vehicle. By 24th May, they had opened two schools in a poor area of Adrianople: One school which was free under the patronage of St. Vincent, which would be open to Catholics,



Painting by Mrs. Germer Durand (Sister Cecile, O.A.)

Orphanage, Adrianople 1899



School of St. Louis, Adrianople prior to 1914

Orthodox, Greeks, Armenians and Jews, and a Boarding School for the more wealthy people of the European society.

*"I insisted on opening both schools the same day because I wished to establish the principle that Works of Charity are our principal work, and that it was only at the request of the Catholics of Adrianople, and as a kindness to them that we consented to open the Boarding School."*⁴⁵ Fr. Galabert.

Within a few years, and under his inspiration, an impressive number of works were established. The Oblates would open an Orphanage, then with the help of Fr. Barthelemy, a Dispensary⁴⁶; then in a very poor area, a new mixed school where lessons would be taught in the Bulgarian language; then a secondary school and a hospital. By 1878 there were already 21 Oblates working between Adrianople and Philippopoli.



School for the Poor, Adrianople 1868



Hospital, Adrianople



Plovdiv, Bulgaria



Despite their lack of education, which Fr. Galabert sometimes lamented, Fr. d'Alzon rejoiced at the way their very limitations offered in the mystery of their lives, could serve the coming of the Kingdom in this hidden corner of Bulgaria: **“What is important for me is not that they are numerous, but that through their holiness, each one works like a hundred.”**⁴⁷

Mother Emmanuel Marie, due to her poor health, was unable to visit the Sisters on site, she trusted Fr. Galabert entirely. The latter called, however, for her to send a local Superior to the Oblates (this would be Sr. Jeanne de Chantal Dugas), as he wished to be relieved of this responsibility which had been entrusted to him temporarily since their arrival and to which he was not entirely suited as he said himself: *“I might have been too kind in certain circumstances but with my character, it is difficult for me to act otherwise.”*⁴⁸

In 1877, the Russian/Turkish war broke out. The Fathers and the Sisters had to abandon teaching to dedicate themselves to the care of the sick and injured, refugees and orphans... The Apostolic Vicar was *“amazed at the facility and joy with which the Oblates accepted the awful deprivations imposed on them, and of their charity towards the poor, sick and tiny children whom they gathered and raised and which imposed on them the greatest deprivations.”*⁴⁹

Whether in the schools or the hospitals, it was always the same charitable and maternal image of the church which the Oblates reflected in their daily adaptability and in fidelity to the mission to which they had been sent by Fr. d'Alzon and Mother Emmanuel-Marie.



Balkan War, Adrianople 1911

47 - Lettres du P. E. d'Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles 1993, p. 235

48 - Extrait de la Session d'Orsay - juillet 1990 « Aînés(es) Fondatrice » sur la Mission d'Orient, par le P. C. Monsch, p. 6

49 - Ibid. 48

9- THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A FOUNDATION 1868-1880

“Who among you, if he wishes to build a tower, does not first sit down?” Lk.14,28

After the heroism of the beginnings, following the hasty training of the early recruits and the precarious situation of their novitiate, and the daring pioneer work in Bulgaria, the time had arrived for the Oblates of the Assumption to be better established. Through the suffering of their Foundress and her collaboration with Fr. d’Alzon, the Oblates would draw the sap little by little which enabled them to grow “like an Olive Tree in the house of God.”

On the day after her perpetual profession, the young Superior General was installed in the house at Rochebelle, in the novitiate, where she would be confronted with many difficulties. Very conscious of the situation, Fr. d’Alzon did not offer her false consolations. Marie of the Compassion would bear the new work in pain:

“Yes, my poor little Mother, you have difficult days to get through. You are well named. I see in these trials the possibility of great fecundity. Rest yourself at Calvary between the Blessed Virgin, your model, and Our Lord, your Spouse. Ten months ago you suffered at Auteuil. This year you suffer in Vigan; next year it will be somewhere else, and this for the remainder of your life. It is cruel of me to lead you to the cross but I am convinced you will thank me for it one day”⁵⁰. (21st June 1868)

“And if Our Lord, as I have often told you, wished that you give birth to this great work through pain? (...) Marie, are you prepared to be my daughter to the degree that we both offer ourselves to suffer if it pleases God? Have then, my daughter, a large, an immense heart; Be Marie of the Compassion and don’t complain about the disappointments and mishaps that cause your soul to feel the sufferings of the Crucified Jesus.”⁵¹ (11th January 1870)

Fr. d’Alzon was still Vicar General of the Diocese of Nîmes, and he had refused, once again, to become a Bishop. His desire to invest himself in the consolidation of the recent foundations urged him question his multiple functions as Vicar General and Founder. But Pope Pius IX did not want him to abandon his Diocesan responsibility and Fr. d’Alzon bowed to this directive.⁵² (22nd August 1864)

In November 1869, he was sent to Rome as Theologian and Secretary to his Bishop, Mgr. Plantier, to assist at the First Vatican Council. Following inflammatory debates, the definition of pontifical infallibility, was proclaimed in July 1870.

Nine months elapsed since he had left Nîmes, long months during which, from Rome, he had entered into a significant correspondence with Mother Emmanuel-Marie. His letters, written during the Council, are a precious legacy which he left her and her Sisters, a true formation destined to provide deep roots for their foundation, where he lavished strength, exhortations, counsels



Thy Kingdom Come!

Here I am, send me!

50 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles 1993, p. 122

51 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles 1993, p. 245-246

52 - Cf. Dossiers sur la Vie et les Vertus, vol. II, T. II, p. 744



Mgr. Plantier
(1813 - 1875)
Bishop of
Nîmes



and directives, with the best and most vigorous fatherly heart, and with an eagle eye which sees farther and deeper:

“My deepest conviction, is that for the conversion of the multitudes, we must above all today let go of aristocratic ways. (...)

It is clear that the Council holds firmly to the poor and the lowly. Believe me, the future of the Church lies there. It will be through poverty and lowliness that the world will be saved if that is possible.

*If anything were to sadden me, it would be to see the Oblates deviate. And if I can express my weakness for them, it is precisely their humble attitude, which is more apt to reach that portion of the world for which Our Lord has a special love.”*⁵³ (14th December 1869)

Through his letters, Fr. d’Alzon never allowed his demands on the Oblates to weaken: he spurs them to find the path of holiness; often he made concrete proposals as in the case of Lent; he reminds them all the time of how much Our Lord needs them for the saving of souls. When he spoke to his daughters, it is like an Army General speaking to his soldiers, exhorting them to gain the martyrs crown: *“I would like you to be resolved to become true victims of love for the salvation of souls. Have courage, and increase it daily. Ask Our Lord to make of you ardent and brilliant lamps. Like John the Baptist, be ambitious to precede everyone, yes, everywhere where He might be better known.”*⁵⁴ (22nd December 1869)

With their “Mother”, if he very often allowed himself to show a deep affection for her, he was preoccupied about her fragile health. How often he holds her in his prayer but despite this does not allow her any indulgence for all that. He wrote to her on 15th February 1870 not without humour: *“Ah, Marie! I no longer want you to be a woman, I want you to be a man! Are you willing?”*⁵⁵ Throughout his letters, he restated, over and over again, his acute thirst for her to communicate to the Oblates a spirit as large as the Church: *“It is dependent on you to let*

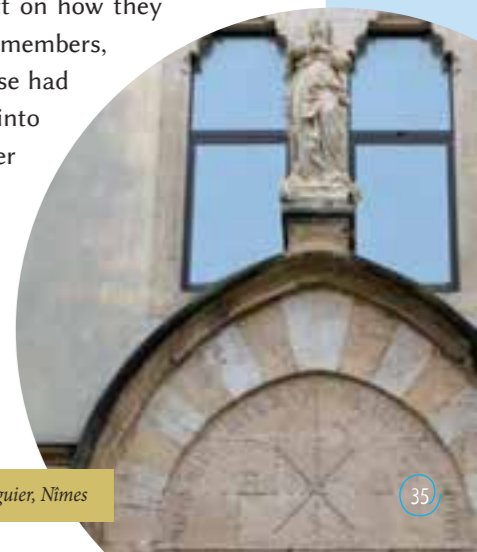


*go of the small miseries, and to apply yourself to give your daughters the whole grandeur, breadth, and Catholic spirit. You need to be a real daughter of the Catholic Church; this should be your great preoccupation-to extend all your efforts towards this objective.”*⁵⁶ (20th March 1870)

After his return from Rome, Fr. d’Alzon continued to train the Oblates through his Conferences and his daily preaching. He spent time, too, helping Mother Emmanuel-Marie draft the Constitutions of the Congregation, which gave more and more power to the General Superior. Their co-operation took place through dialogue and mutual submission, they consulted one another about the multiple decisions to take.

“Allow me to tell you that I thank Our Lord daily to have sent me a daughter, a helper like you.”⁵⁷ (5th April 1878).

The time had arrived, too, for the growing Congregation to reflect on how they could “extend the pegs of their tent”. With the growing number of new members, the House at Rochebelle had become too small, besides which the lease had run out. There were plans to move the Noviciate to Nîmes, perhaps into a space around the College? Finally, thanks to the generosity of her family, Mother Emmanuel-Marie purchased 26 rue Séguier in Nîmes – the house which would become the “Mother House” of the Oblates: they moved in on 11th March 1873. A little after that, in October 1873, Mother Emmanuel-Marie opened a school, and in May 1876 a Boarding School where Fr. d’Alzon came regularly to preach, confess and to celebrate the Sunday Mass. There was no proper Chapel, however, at this point.



53 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles 1993, p. 235

54 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T. VIII, p. 83

55 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T. VIII, p. 202

56 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T. VIII, p. 275

57 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T. XII, p. 420

The decision was taken to build one and on 27th June 1878, in memory of that famous 27th June when Marie Correnson had arrived at Rochebelle, Fr. d'Alzon had the joy of blessing the foundation stone of the sacred building. Inside the stone, a sealed tube was placed with notes of the "official proceedings"⁵⁸ of the day:

*"Fr. d'Alzon chose this so that the vision of this stone would constantly remind current and future Oblates of that other fundamental stone of our 'spiritual building'."*⁵⁹

A year later, in the same chapel, Fr. d'Alzon came to bless the bell that his daughter had baptised "Emmanuel-Marie":

*"Emmanuel is your name, Marie is mine, and the union our names on this bell will be the image of both our hearts working for the same cause."*⁶⁰ (14th April 1879)

Fr. d'Alzon also pointed to the place in the chapel where he wished to be buried, where he desired to rest after his death, in the presence of his daughters. He had begun to feel his strength failing and he felt his death approach. On 11th October 1880 it was in this same chapel that he celebrated his last mass to commemorate his mother's death in 1860.

The rising anticlerical feeling had reached Nîmes and his spiritual sons wondered how they could prevent their Father being ejected from the College as he lay dying. Together with other Religious Congregations, the Assumptionists in France were being expelled due to "their notoriety, their abundant activities and their extensive influence". The Prefecture intervened to obtain that Fr. d'Alzon be allowed die in his room at Assumption College.

On the morning of 5th November 1880, he received Extreme Unction. When Mother Emmanuel-Marie visited him, he welcomed her with tearful eyes: *"I could not give you the*

sacraments as I promised. Fr. Emmanuel

Bailly has just administered them

*to me."*⁶¹ On 16th November

they had another encounter,

when he warned her of probable trials which would await

her when he was gone. Then

he gave his fatherly blessing

to her, and through her to all his

daughters. On 21st November, Feast of

the Presentation of Mary in the

Temple, at the mid-day Angelus,

he died in the peace of his own

room, at Assumption College.



Tombs of Fr. E. d'Alzon and Mother E.M. Correnson

58 - L'Assomption, Biographies - Souvenirs-Bonnes (Euvres, 1878 & 1879, Nîmes 1879, p. 100
59 - Cf. E. S., p. 1213
60 - Lettres de M. E.-M. Correnson, Bruxelles-Paris 2005, p. 82-83
61 - Dossiers sur la Vie et les Vertus, vol. II, T. II, p. 1009

10 - BEFORE THE PIETA, THE TEARS OF A FOUNDESS

1880-1900

“Beside the Cross of Jesus, stood his mother.”

(Jn 19,25)

Mother

Emmanuel-Marie could hear the resounding words her “Father” had addressed to her from Rome, and in them she drew the strength to continue the route alone at the age of 38 years:

*“Marie, Marie, let us do great things, not in the eyes of the world, but in the eyes of Him to whom we wish to consecrate our hearts a little more each day.”*⁶²

(16th May 1870)

From heaven, Fr. d’Alzon continued to be her counsellor and guide, but she wondered to whom the governance of the Congregation of the Oblates would fall, now that the Founder was no longer there. At her request, he had accepted this responsibility for a period of 6 years, as Superior General of the Augustinians of the Assumption and as Founder. But this was not without a certain reticence as he had always wished that the Oblates, while leaning on their Brother Assumptionists, had their own governance, as he had indicated in a letter to Fr. Galabert on 22th September 1876: *“In our relations with the Oblates, you must direct them rather than govern...”*⁶³

At the death of Fr. d’Alzon, Fr. Francis Picard was unanimously elected Superior General of the Augustinians of the Assumption. From 1882, he wished to obtain from Mother Emmanuel-Marie, that the responsibility initially foreseen for 6 years be prolonged, that she place her Congregation under his governance, and that she transfer the Novitiate from Nîmes to Paris. With the agreement of her Counsel, Mother Emmanuel-Marie, preferred not to renew the arrangement whose term had just been completed, and to maintain the autonomy of her Congregation, she referred to the Constitutions which assigned the government of the Institute to the General Superior.

In face of this choice, however legitimate, Fr. Picard decided to open a second Novitiate in the Region of Paris, and the Oblates were asked to choose between their Co-Foundress and Fr. Picard. The sisters on the mission (influenced by Sr. Jeanne de Chantal Dugas who was totally dedicated to Fr. Picard) voted by majority in favour of him. Mother Marguerite-Marie Chamska, sent by Mother Emmanuel-Marie Correnson, arrived after the vote had been taken. Rome took note of the proceedings and in October 1882 the Congregation was split. This division into two branches, The Oblates of Nîmes and the Oblates of Paris, broke the heart of the Co-Foundress of the Oblates. Unity between both groups would not be re-established until 1926 but she would see it only from heaven.

62 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T. VIII, p. 374

63 - Lettres du P. E. d’Alzon au P. V. Galabert, T. XI, p. 472

64 - Lettres du P.E. d'Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T.VI, p. 260
65 - Lettres du P.E. d'Alzon à M. E.-M. Correnson, T.VII, p. 130

In 1891, another trial awaited Mother Emmanuel-Marie. She was convoked by a Diocesan Official. The legitimacy of the title of the Congregation had been contested in view of the possible confusion between the different branches of the Assumption. It took two years for the Decree to arrive from Rome on 13th February 1893 which put an end to the Diocesan lawsuit and the recognition of the Institute of the Oblates of the Assumption.

During these painful years, the Oblates of Nîmes observed their Mother in tears praying daily in the garden before the Statue of *The Pieta*, joining her offering to that of the Virgin Mary.

In view of the health of this suffering Mother, which became more and more precarious, Rome requested in 1897 that a General Chapter take place with a view to replacing her in her role. Mother Emmanuel-Marie ceded silently in face of the Roman decision, and took her place among the Sisters. Mother Marguerite-Marie Chamska, her Assistant, was then elected Superior General on 18th September.

Relieved of the weight of responsibility, Mother Emmanuel-Marie continued to give life to her Congregation by the generous acceptance of her weakness, and by the offering of her broken heart. She participated daily at Mass in the Chapel of Rue Seguier until 23rd July 1900 when she could no longer receive Communion. In the early afternoon of 24th, the community gathered around her bed at the moment she received the last sacraments: she did not speak but seemed to understand. It was the time for Goodbyes, the Sisters embraced her, each one in turn, before going to the Chapel. While they sang Vespers, she fell asleep in peace, entirely into the hands of her Spouse, assured that He would accomplish his will at the right time. It was from Heaven that she rejoiced at the eventual reunion of her Religious family, for whom she had offered, day after day, the best of her mother's heart...

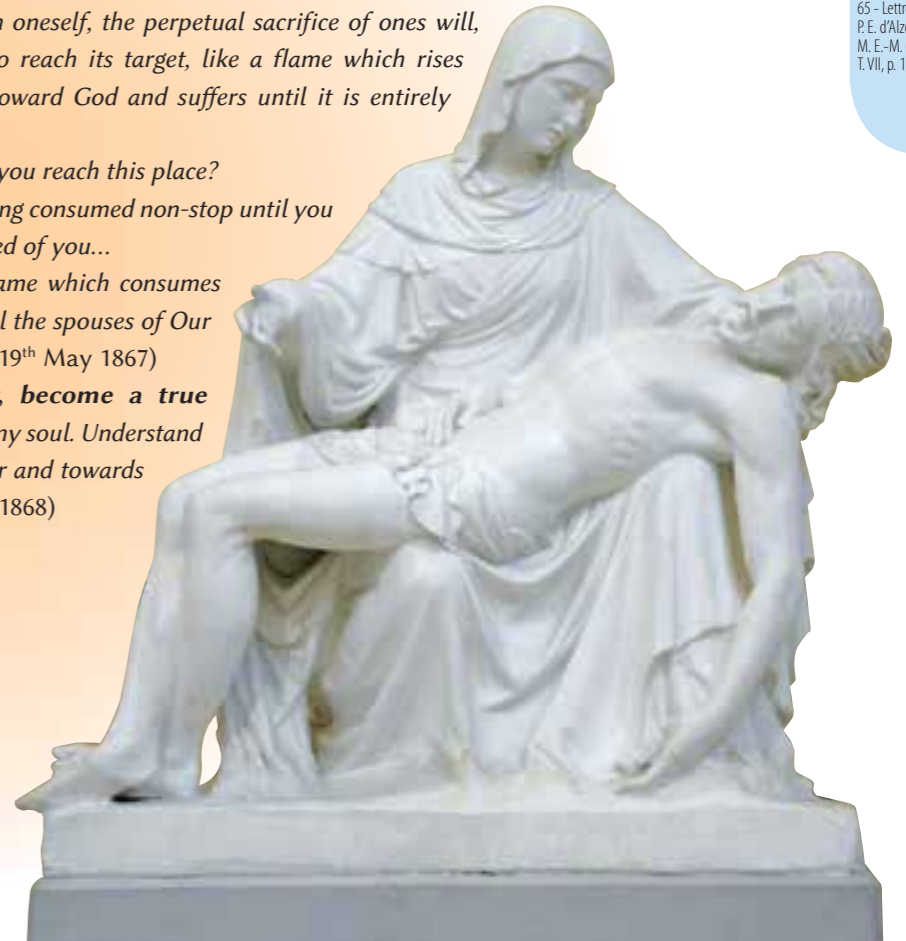
Let us allow Fr. d'Alzon tell us once again his ambition for his daughter Marie Correnson, and for each of his spiritual daughters, his ambition to see them saints, his ambition to see them working for the Kingdom of Christ's reign everywhere!

“What we should become, will come about by, perpetual struggle, complete detachment from the world and from oneself, the perpetual sacrifice of ones will, through the impetus of an arrow to reach its target, like a flame which rises towards heaven, a love which flies toward God and suffers until it is entirely united to Him.

*Oh! Dear little Mother, when will you reach this place?
A true spouse, a real seraphim, being consumed non-stop until you are one with God! That is what is asked of you...*

*You must be like a contagious flame which consumes not only your soul, but the souls of all the spouses of Our Lord who will be confided to you.”*⁶⁴ (19th May 1867)

*“My daughter, my daughter, become a true saint! It is the most legitimate cry of my soul. Understand this and begin by always going higher and towards what is most perfect.”*⁶⁵ (14th August, 1868)



A Universal Overview



The seed having fallen into the earth through the lives of Fr. d'Alzon and Mother Emmanuel-Marie Correnson, developed slowly. It was in the region of the Cevennes, from where the Founders and the first members emerged, that the history of the Congregation began humbly, with a view to a very particular mission, in a precise country: Bulgaria.

However, what happened during the following centuries? At the beginning of the 21st century, even though the Mother House of the Congregation remained at Nîmes, at the Generalate in Paris, new members now come not only from France. The Congregation has developed well beyond Bulgaria and the East, having opened in Africa, Latin America and in Asia, it has finally become international spreading across more than 20 countries.

Of course, the history of the Oblates is a reflection of the history of the whole Church which sees itself ageing in Europe, obliged to close houses due to a lack of new members, and at the same time, witnessing a flowering of new members in other parts of the world. But this universal "overview" is surely evidence of their fidelity to the missionary spirit of their Founders. **"My daughters, you will go across the seas!"** The present Superior General is not of French origin: Sister Felicia Ghiorghies is Romanian.

For at least ten years, the General Council has been composed of Sisters from different continents: Europe, Africa, Asia. One of the Novice Mistresses for France came from the Congo, novices are invited to have placements in other countries... **International, Intercontinental, intercultural** – many different strands honouring a founder whose heart was large, open to the needs of the Church and, therefore, Universal.

Bronze Statue sculpted in 1891 by Mother Myriam Franck O.A.

Window depicting the Eastern Mission in the General House, Paris



The Eastern Mission

At the outset of the story, it was a question for the Oblates to go to Bulgaria but fairly rapidly it became obvious that they would travel generally across the East, wherever they could be useful, with the adaptability which characterised Mother Emmanuel-Marie of the Compassion and the Sisters who succeeded her.

In the same way, if the initial project was principally to confide schools to the Oblates, events would modify the orientation of their project, because in the East, the Oblates would be confronted with many trials which they had to respond to, particularly a whole series of wars and epidemics.

And so, in 1877, ten years after the first foundation in Adrianople, war was declared between Russia and Turkey: the Russians crossed Bulgaria and Adrianople was under siege for several months. Spontaneously, the Oblates in agreement with Fr. Galabert, abandoned their houses and schools to the injured, the sick, refugees and welcomed abandoned children. For them it was the beginning of a new field of apostolate with the creation of Dispensaries, Orphanages and Hospitals.

Adrianople 1913



In 1913 the Balkan War was declared: once again, Adrianople was under siege for the whole winter period, bombarded for five months. The Fathers and Sisters remained devotedly at their posts trying to help the local population. They were, like them, prey to famine and epidemics. Mother Jeanne de Chantal visited and nursed thousands of military and civil prisoners in the Camps of Ismidt. Their devotion to those in need during that war earned them the respect of the Orthodox Churches and, no doubt, inspired many of the new members who joined them from the local population. At this point the Congregation numbered around 250 members in the Missionary Countries of the East – 120 of French origin and already 130 coming from the Greek, Armenian, Romanian, Turkish, Serbian, Slovenian and Croatian countries.

In 1922, it was the Greek/Turkish war. Once again the schools of the Oblates were turned into Refuges, and 15,000 Greek refugees were lodged in the Barracks of Selimieh near Haidar Pacha in terrible conditions. The Sisters nursed the typhoid victims. Sister Eftykia (Greek) and Sister Immaculata (Armenian) fell victim to the epidemic.



Plovdiv, Bulgaria





Expelled from the East, notably by the brutal reaction following the Treaty of Lausanne, the Oblates took refuge in another area of the East: Yugoslavia, Belgrade and Romania where they arrived in 1925 to collaborate with the Assumptionist Fathers, at the request of Bishop Frentiu, of the Byzantine Rite.



Panduri Hospital, Bucarest

A longer trial awaited them from 1948: in Romania the Communist Regime provoked their temporary dispersion. In November, arbitrary arrests began and the Sisters were forced to leave their house within the space of 3 days while continuing their work at the Hospital. The East became from this point the "Province of desolation": behind the Iron Curtain. Certain Sisters kept vigil and prayed in silence, others returned to France, two were imprisoned (and were only liberated in the early 60's). Mothers Marie-Augustine Vigne, Christiane-Marie Mellerio and Georgette-Marie Fayolle – (Superior Generals during this period), made several visits clandestinely to meet the Sisters, under the cover of tourism.



Orthodox Monastery of Sucevita, Romania

At the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, there were still some Oblates living clandestinely in Bucarest and Bacau (Romania), and in Istanbul (Turkey). After Communism new projects began in collaboration with the Assumptionist Fathers enabling the Oblates to return to their country of origin around the Black Sea: progressively the dispersed Sisters were gathered together and new communities were established in Moldavia and Transylvania.



Istanbul, Turkey

By 1993 the Oblates were re-established in Bulgaria at Plovdiv followed by Moscow and Jerusalem which they had left respectively eight six and forty six years earlier.



Jerusalem, Israel

A great spirit of faith, adaptability in face of events, the needs of the poor wherever the situation presented itself, courage under trials, this is what characterised the Oblates during these years.



Moscow, Russia





Europe

In the early years after their foundation, there were two main axes for the Oblates of the Assumption: on the one hand their cradle in France and on the other, the missionary territory overseas but exclusively in Eastern Europe.

Their roots were in France, and, besides their Noviciate and the multiple works of education which had been confided to them, there existed a very different field of apostolate: their collaboration with the Assumptionist Brothers in Bayard Publishing House and the creation of the daily newspaper "La Croix". From 1883 the Oblates invested a great deal of effort in their apprenticeship in publishing.

Once again external events modified the initial plans of the Congregation. Religious were expelled from France following the anticlerical laws of 1901. Mother Marguerite-Marie Chamska, Superior General who succeeded the Foundress, sought safe refuge overseas where Sisters could go in surrounding countries. She transferred the community of Nîmes to Switzerland where they remained for only a few months. She sent another group of Sisters

Mother Marguerite-Marie Chamska



The Oblates in the workshops of Bayard Publishing House



Hulsberg, Netherlands



Pastoral work with the Young, Italy



Froyennes, Belgium

to Florence in Italy and in 1902 she sent yet another one to three communities in Armenia and Belgium where the first foundation was established at Marchienne-au-Pont in 1894. In 1903 she sent some Sisters to the house in the Netherlands. Finally in 1903 yet another group went to England. Everywhere the Oblates developed work in education, social and pastoral work, opening schools, clinics and Nursery Schools, showing



Russia 1995

Romania 1925

England 1903

Netherlands 1903

Italy 1902

Belgium 1894

Bulgaria 1868

France 1865



London, England

their characteristic adaptability as ever. Reacting to exterior events, the Oblates began to develop in Europe and in North America.

At the request of the Assumptionist Fathers in Worcester, Boston (USA) in 1956, they opened a community at the service of Assumption University College. This community was dependant on the Netherlands and they remained there until 1977.

In Northern Ireland, a community opened in 1969 in Armagh at the request of Cardinal Conway, but the experience was aborted when the barricades began to rise in front of their convent and the community had to be closed given the insecurity. It wasn't until 1983 that the Irish mission returned, this time in Southern Ireland.

After Vatican II, during the mandate of Mother Christiane-Marie Mellerio, there was a new deployment of Oblates in response to the needs of a Church and a world in mutation: small communities were created in popular suburbs of dechristianised Paris. Given the missionary initiative of the Bishops and the adaptability of the consecrated life, the Oblates once again showed their capacity to adapt to a new form of poverty.

Lille, France



In an ageing Europe, nothing changes in the generous response of Oblates who live their motto: "Send me" to the end, whether to the workshops of Bayard Publishing, to countries where ecumenical dialogue is essential, or in dechristianised suburbs.



Nîmes, France



Beaucaire, France



General House, Paris





Africa

In the words of Marie de Crisenoy, the itinerary of the Oblate Family passed from a “desolated Eastern mission and the Christianity of Europe to the black Churches”: once again it was essential to be supplied given the events of history and the needs of the time. Faithful to the words of their Master, the Oblates knew how to move from one country to another: “When you are chased from one town, go to another...”

Mother Berthe-Marie Pare, Superior General from 1926, closed houses in Turkey in 1935, and at Christmas that same year, established a mission in Beni, in the Belgian Congo – currently the Democratic Republic of Congo. This was the beginning of the implantation of Oblates in Africa where they joined their Brother Assumptionists who had been there since 1929 and who in a burgeoning church risked the danger of it being too masculine. “Until we have Religious, our missions will be like families without a mother...”⁶⁶ wrote Fr. Henri Pierard Superior of the Mission, to Mother Berthe-Marie Pare, to explain the need for the presence of Oblates at their side, notably in view of the need to educate African women. To prepare for this demanding mission, two Oblates followed courses in tropical medicine and the future missionaries learned the indigenous language.

From the early days in Beni, people brought new-born baby orphans to the Sisters: this is how the need to create an Orphanage arose. Then it was a primary school, a dispensary, a Maternity Hospital, Needlework Workshops. Following their development, in 1938 a new second community was opened at Manguredjipa.

In the Belgian Congo, the Oblates brought their precise contribution firstly in the domain of education and the emancipation of women. In 1940, in the same perspective, Mother Marie-Michael Rainfray decided to open another house in Muhangi Sainte-Marie, where the Oblates trained young Africans and were at the service of abandoned lepers.

In March 1948 the Oblates went to Bunyuka and the Orphanage of Manguredjipa was transferred. Bishop Pierard A.A. having obtained permission to found an indigenous Congregation for women, asked the Oblates to train these new Sisters. Mother Joseph Bruijn, O.A.

Primary School, Butembo DRC



Hospital, Butembo, DRC

Kinshasa, DRC



Kenya 2014

Gabon 2013

Uganda 2011

Tunisia 2010

Burkina Faso 2000

Tanzania 1998

Rwanda 1981

Ivory Coast 1975

DRC 1935



became the first Superior General and Mistress of Formation in the Congregation of the Little Sisters of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple (PSP).

The same Assumptionist Bishop, H. Pierard, called on the Oblates to create a Boarding School for the children of the colonies in Butembo. In August 1943 the Boarding School of Our Lady of the Assumption became a reality, and in a few years its reputation was made. The Establishment knew great success and soon became the source of many new members for the Oblates who opened a Postulancy for indigenous girls in 1959. Initially the novices were sent to Belgium for their training and then in 1969 the decision was finally taken, to open a Noviciate in Butembo.

At this time the Oblates were solicited to improve the public health of the Congolese population. In 1949 there was a new foundation at Musienene to help a Belgian Doctor to create a hospital for indigenous people. Sister Renee-Guido Popa, who was a doctor of Romanian origin, was Director of the Hospital until 1988. At this same time, the Oblates took responsibility for another hospital in Mutwanga.

1964 was a painful year the Belgian Congo – the winds of rebellion were rife: the atrocities of the civil war and its ravages forced the Oblates to temporarily leave the country. As soon as the tensions were appeased some returned faithfully to their posts. A few years later, between 1970 and 1973, three new foundations were established in Butembo, Mangina – in the middle of the equatorial forest and in Beni-Cite. In September 1975 the Congolese Government confiscated the schools and tried to Nationalise them. However, this experiment did not succeed and in 1977



Ferke, Ivory Coast



Sinematiali, Ivory Coast



Ferke, Ivory Coast

the Oblates were recalled and generously, re-opened and took responsibility for their old schools.

During the 1970's the Congolese Mission counted about forty members distributed in eight houses – a growth which was at the origin of a new expansion in Africa. Internationality was developing at the level of the continent of Africa as the Congolese Sisters became missionaries in turn in other African countries.

During the mandate of Sr. Georgette-Marie Fayolle, a project to establish a foundation in West Africa was studied and it was to the Ivory Coast at Napieledougou, that the Oblates settled in December 1975. A Congolese Sister was sent to the Ivory Coast but the evangelisation of the country was not easy due to the fact that the population is mainly muslim or animist...

Later other Congolese Sisters went as missionaries to Rwanda. In 1981 at the request of the Bishop, the Oblates arrived in the country to work in the area of health where there was much to do. At the beginning of the 90's, the political climate changed and the genocide was silently being prepared.

The Oblates who were there, sowed in tears because on 25th February 1992, two of their Sisters were assassinated: Sister Renee-Guido Popa, who after years of devoted service as a doctor in the Congo, had arrived in Rwanda to teach French to the young Rwandans, both she and a local aspirant, Francoise

Sr. Renee-Guido Popa



Thy Kingdom Come!
Here I am, send me!



Sr. Renee-Guido Popa



Wasso, Tanzania

Nyirangendo died. The community in grief, the house was closed temporarily until the mission was re-opened in 1995.

In 1998, Tanzania became new missionary territory: three years after the arrival of the Assumptionists, the Oblates were requested by the Bishop of Arusha. Progressively, the Sisters worked on several fronts: education at Arusha and Wasso; the training of Teachers at Loliondo; Healthcare in the hospital at Wasso which serves the Massai population. Pastoral and catechetical work for the base communities added to their repertoire together with rural development, at different levels of the Archdiocese. The Region trains the young sisters in formation from various East African countries. Today, loved and respected, they have progressively won the trust of the Tanzanian people in its cultural diversity.

In 2000, they had arrived in Burkina-Faso! Bishop Anselm Sanon, of Bobo-Dioulasso invited the Oblates from the Ivory Coast to work in the primary schools of his diocese. The area is open to evangelisation and young women are attracted by the lifestyle of the Sisters.

In 2001, the Oblates arrived in Brazzaville for the formation of young women in Religious Life. Given the insecurity which reigned in the country, the community was obliged to move to Kinshasa. The Sisters returned in 2007 and remained until 2013. The mission consisted in teaching, healthcare and pastoral assistance in the Parish of "Saint Kisito."

Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso



A Massai Family



In this young African continent, the mission of the Oblates sown in 1935, has shown exceptional vitality, without doubt nourished by much suffering and vigorous faith. In 2011, it has become a strong tree extending through the different regions of Africa: Three communities in Cental Africa, three in Kinshasa; two in West Africa, the Ivory Coast and Burkina-Faso; Four communities in Rwanda and five in Tanzania. In response to a call to work in the realm of evangelisation, a community of Oblates opened in 2011 in Uganda, another one in 2013 in Gabon and yet another one in 2014 in Kenya.

The most beautiful sign of this extraordinary growth is that the Congolese Province has been able to send 80 Oblates to the four corners of the world!

Kasese, Uganda



Rukomo, Rwanda



Ngoma, Uganda



Latin America

In response to a request from the Church, often received via the Assumptionist Bishops, the the Oblates turned towards Latin America. Curiously, their first implantations on this continent are relatively recent as they date from the middle of the 20th century.

The first mission in South America began in Brazil in 1964: Bishop Horthuis, Assumptionist Bishop of Jales, asked that the Oblates of the Assumption join their Brothers already in his Diocese, originally in the area of healthcare and later in catechetics and the training of Pastoral Assistants. It was Sisters from the Netherlands and a French Sister who were first sent to Brazil.

Other foundations opened, firstly in Santa Fe do Sol in the diocese of Jales, then in Andradas and Campinas. In 1993, their missionary ardour took them in the direction of the Amazon to Tapaua where the concerns of the Bishops urged them to devote themselves to the service of the regions most abandoned. This mission was as original as it was audacious.

They travelled by boat every two months to visit the Indian population living on the river banks. Their mission lasted a few weeks each time. In order to preach the gospel they were ready for any sacrifice and the Parish Boat became their home with its hammocks and minimum furnishings! A few years later, the Oblates established themselves in Manaus, the capital of the Amazon.

In 1980 at the centenary celebrations of Fr. d'Alzon's death, when the entire Assumptionist Family gathered to share their various missionary

Tapaua, Amazon



Tapaua, Amazon

experiences, a new project was conceived for the Latin American continent. To second their Assumptionist Brothers in Chili, the Oblates founded a community in the country. The first implantation dates from 1982 at Valparaiso, followed by Rengo and Santiago. Working in Parishes, establishing dispensaries and other work, their emphasis was to work in solidarity the local population. They remained until 2007. Between 1995 and 1999, the Oblates worked in Haiti at the service of the sick and the poor. War dictated that they leave this mission.

Their departure for Paraguay was also the fruit of encounters and discussions: Divine Providence permitted friendships to be established between priests from Paraguay studying in Rome and the Oblates of Italy. As a consequence, attentive to the Holy Spirit, a few sisters responded to the invitation of



Sisters from the Brazilian-Paraguay Region



Paraguay 2007

Brazil 1965

these priests to work in their country. In 2007, Brazilian and Italian Sisters went there with a view to working in the basic communities and to help some young girls in their vocational research. A Latin-American Noviciate opened its doors in 2015 for young Brazilians, Paraguayans and Mexicans.

The Sisters of Latin America live from the work of their hands: Parish and Social Work, sale of their work, market gardening etc. They are also implicated in catechetics and local community development. They give lessons in I.T. technology, languages, painting etc.



San Lorenzo, Paraguay

Paraguayan Dance, by the young sisters

San Lorenz, Paraguay

They live, in short, the Pauline motto which Fr. d'Alzon gave to Mother Emmanuel-Marie "To be all to all" (I Co.9,22). As an Assumptionist Father wrote some time ago, "The Congregation, as well as the sanctification of its members, has a universal aim. The way it achieves its mission bears the original trait, inherited from their founder and speaks volumes about his personality and action"⁶⁷.

The secret is inculturation: the ability to "be all to all", which is lived at every level in the Latin American mission, the ability to adapt to situations that are not their natural environment.



Thy Kingdom Come!

Here I am, send me!

67 - P. Cayré Fulbert, AA : Mémoire assumptionniste, Ecrits au fil des ans, 1850-2000, Ed. du Buguey, Savoie, 2000, p.14.



68 - Lettre du Père d'Alzon aux novices des Oblates de l'Assomption, Bruxelles 1993, p. 240, le 22 décembre 1869.

Great Wall of China



Asia

To his Oblates, Fr. d'Alzon gave the limits of their mission as "the great wall of China..."⁶⁸, and with prophetic boldness, his daughters are ready to cross any sea for the sake of the Coming of God's Kingdom. Arriving in South Korea they had, effectively gone further than the great wall of China!

The story of the Korean mission began with Paulina Shim, a Korean whose father converted to Christianity. In 1964 Paulina entered the Oblates in Belgium. When the Congregation received a call to look at Asia, naturally it was towards this Korean Sister that the Superiors turned.



Mokpo, Korea

Gwangju, Korea



It was a question of approaching the Religious Authorities of Gwangju and Seoul. In 1985, with the agreement of Bishop Youn, the Oblates set foot in South Korea at Mokpo. There were two Sisters at first, responsible for Parish work. Young women asked to join them and they opened a Noviciate nearby a few months later. In 1990, they opened a community in Seoul where they work in Parish collaboration.

A little later, the Oblates thought about Vietnam where their Assumptionist Brothers had preceded them by a few years: A sister of Vietnamese origin pioneered the mission in this country. Sister Marie-Paulette Alaux was responsible for making initial contact with the local Church. In 2006, visiting with Sr. Claire Rabitz, General Superior, they met Fr. Bosco, a Franciscan whose main work was vocational awakening. Responsible for Student Youth Hostels, he promised his collaboration and facilitated their encounter with young women who were thinking about Religious Life and wished to know the world of the Oblates.

With the agreement of the Bishop, the Superior General invited them to commence their initial training in Religious Life in France and in 2008, Sr. Marie-Paulette went to live



China 2013

Philippines 2010

Vietnam 2009

Korea 1985

Israël 1935

Turkey 1889



Saigon, Vietnam

in Vietnam. In 2009 the mission officially opened in their own country in Ho Chi Minh City. Shortly afterwards, young Vietnamese girls began their formation in their own country and in August 2014 a Novitiate was opened.

Thanks to the initiative of the Congregation in Asia and providential circumstances, China came to encounter the Oblates. To receive and train the first Chinese Sisters, a community was opened in Manila, Philippines in 2010.

As can be seen the Oblates are just at the beginning of this new missionary adventure.

“Despite the fragility of our Asian communities in Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and China, explains Sr. Felicia, General Superior of the Oblates of the Assumption, I realise how very beautiful and challenging our mission is. There are different nuances of accent in function of the socio-cultural and political context in which they find themselves. In almost all these countries there are two common elements: the gospel is announced by the laity and religion holds a central place in the life of the people. Catholicism incarnates modernity.

This is a considerable challenge to the Universal Church and particularly for the Asian Church as well as for our Congregation.



Manila, Philippines

The Asian Oblates and those called to be missionaries in Asia need to feel at ease with the triple objective of evangelisation seen in terms of dialogue: **dialogue with various religions** (Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism etc.) **with the culture and with the poor**. Faithful to our charism, we want to be women of dialogue, of communion and unity at the service of the most deprived. It is for each one of us to open our hearts to the dimensions of the world and to always see beyond our own horizons!”

To “see beyond” for the Oblates is to see China where new members are emerging, as if in response to a call dating from 1935 when their Assumptionist Brothers left to establish themselves in Manchuria. And so, a first community of Oblates was established in 2013 and a second in 2014.



Great Wall of China

An International Congregation

150 years after their foundation in Nîmes, in fidelity to their missionary vocation, the Oblates of the Assumption have become an International Congregation. The challenge they are facing is the same at that of their origins, to “work for the coming of the Kingdom” everywhere and in all hearts. But this challenge has to be lived in a world where many cultures and religions are interwoven, in a world where contacts are multiplied.

“Set sail!”⁶⁹ said the Master. The missionary challenge urges them on, calling upon them to be inventive so that Christ might be announced by every means; inviting them to a renewed solidarity with the local Church and the great family of the Assumption.



Generalate House, Paris

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	p. 03
HISTORY	p. 04
1. The Childhood and Youth of Emmanuel Daude d’Alzon (1810-1832).....	p. 05
2. His Spiritual training up to his Ordination (1832-1834).....	p. 08
3. Fr. d’Alzon at the service of the Diocese of Nîmes (1835-1844).....	p. 10
4. From the College in Nîmes to the foundation of the Augustinians of the Assumption (1845-1857).....	p. 13
5. “I bless your works of the East...” (1860-1865).....	p. 16
6. The Foundation of the Oblates of the Assumption (1865)	p. 19
7. A Foundress for the Congregation of the Oblates (1866-1868)	p. 21
8. Departure for the Eastern Mission (1868)	p. 27
9. The Establishment of a Foundation (1868-1880)	p. 32
10. Before the Pieta, the tears of a Foundress (1880-1900)	p. 38
A UNIVERSAL OVERVIEW	p. 42
The Eastern Mission	p. 44
Europe.....	p. 48
Africa	p. 52
Latin America.....	p. 58
Asia	p. 62
An International Congregation.....	p. 66



Éditions du Signe

1, rue Alfred Kastler – BP 10094 – Eckbolsheim – 67038 STRASBOURG CEDEX – France

Tel: +33 (0)3 88 78 91 91 – Fax: +33 (0)3 88 78 91 99

www.editionsdusigne.fr – Email: info@editionsdusigne.fr

Text: Monique Plassard and the Sisters Oblates of the Assumption

Layout: a-la-Folie

Photographies: the Congregation;

Fotolia: p.7 (background): © designlements; p.14 (background): © Anette Linnea Rasmussen; p.15 (background): © Olivier Tuffé;
p.22-23: © Khorzhevskia; p.32: © Fotolia_8986733_XL; p.38 (background): © Chepko Danil; p.51 (background): © 41370648_M xy;
p.61 (background): © kbuntu

© Éditions du Signe - 2015, 109956

All rights reserved - Unauthorized Reproduction Prohibited

ISBN: 978-2-7468-3282-4

Printed in the E.U.